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The Washington Monthly, June 2007

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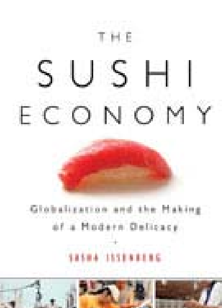
Is the spread of sushi to middle-class American malls a good globalization story?

By Brendan I. Koerner



Midway through *The Breakfast Club*, John Hughes's seminal film about Reagan-era teen angst, the five main characters tuck into brown-bag lunches. Actress Molly Ringwald, playing the archetypal suburban princess, pulls out a tray of sushi, to the astonishment of Judd Nelson's drug-addled outcast.

"You won't accept a guy's tongue in your mouth, and you're going to eat *that*?" he sneers, obviously never having sampled a piece of *toro* (fatty tuna) or *hamachi* (yellowtail) himself.

Ringwald's character is offended by the innuendo, but also derisive of her inquisitor's lack of sophistication.

"Can I eat?" she huffs in response. "I don't know," says Nelson, eyes wide with revulsion. "Give it a try."

Depicting Ringwald's spoiled brat as an unapologetic sushi eater was an easy way for Hughes to underscore her elitism. In 1985, the year *The Breakfast Club* came out, sushi was still a mystery to most Americans, who associated the food with flighty Hollywood stars and reprehensible yuppies. Raw fish and seaweed, rolled into cones or tubes? Such dainty, briny fare was surely part of a Japanese plot to weaken the American spirit.

Twenty-two years later, Hughes's cinematic shorthand seems archaic, akin to sticking a handlebar mustache on a movie's villain. No self-respecting American city, however distant from the oceans, is without a sushi

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restaurant, perhaps one
that offers a $12.99 all-you-can-eat special on Monday nights, or prepackaged trays of Philadelphia rolls tinged with cream cheese. Sushi is a favorite of fictional gangster Tony Soprano, and of real-life football demigod Peyton Manning (who, according to the *Boston Herald*, recently treated on-the-field rival Tom Brady to a dinner of *toro* tartare, *hamachi* with elephant garlic, and hot *sake*).

Sasha Issenberg, a *Philadelphia* magazine writer (and occasional *Washington Monthly* contributor) best known for exposing the mendacity of *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, shares these macho heroes' zeal for sushi. But he also realizes that there's something a smidge bizarre about a world in which the landlocked residents of, say, Oklahoma or Paraguay enjoy seemingly inexhaustible supplies of fatty tuna, while Tokyoites have learned to love *unagi* (grilled eel) served on buttery croissants. Issenberg's meticulously reported *The Sushi Economy: Globalization and the Making of a Modern Delicacy* explains not only how sushi evolved from reviled curiosity into beloved treat in the United States, but also how the skyrocketing demand for *ika* (squid), *uni* (sea urchin roe), and, above all, *toro* has simultaneously knocked both nature and commerce askew.

The Sushi Economy opens with a zinger of an anecdote, which Issenberg presents as modern sushi's Eureka moment. In the early 1970s, executives at Japan Airlines fretted that the cargo holds on their Vancouver-to-Tokyo flights were often empty. So the airline asked its Canadian freight coordinator, a man named Wayne MacAlpine, to look into whether these planes could be crammed with bluefin tuna from Prince Edward Island. McAlpine was somewhat baffled by the request, since fishermen on the island, some 2,800 miles to the east of Vancouver, didn't much care for the bluefin's taste—as he Teletyped back to his bosses in Japan, "What [the fishermen] did after they caught them is they had their picture taken with the fish and dug a hole with a small bulldozer and buried them."

The airline executives were stunned: each buried bluefin could garner hundreds, even thousands, of dollars in Japan, a country already suffering the ravages of overfishing. The company took the unprecedented step of importing five Canadian bluefins for a 1972 auction at Tokyo's Tsukiji fish market. The giant tunas proved a hit, selling for the then-steep price of $4 per kilogram. The race to satiate the world's *toro* jones was on. "Sushi was nearly two millennia old," writes Issenberg, "but it was that morning at Tsukiji that the current experience of eating it was born."

The Japan Airlines experiment was largely a triumph of technology: a special refrigeration unit had been developed to prevent the tunas' flesh from blanching while in transit. Yet it also signaled how Japan's culinary tastes, as well as its economic fortunes, had changed since the Imperial Era. Before World War II, tuna was considered an inferior fish, sushi's answer to beef knuckles. And the fattiest part of a tuna wasn't even deemed fit for human consumption; it was instead reserved for cat food. The Japanese first learned the pleasures of greasy meats during the late 1940s, when they mimicked the carnivorous habits of their American occupiers. As their nation's fiscal health improved, Issenberg writes, the Japanese began to indulge ever more openly in gastronomic excess: "Soon, Tokyo palates were acting a lot like those in Paris or Chicago,

which associated luxury with rich fat, whether in *fois gras*, chocolate truffles, soft cheese, or porterhouses-for-two."

One of the first non-Japanese entrepreneurs to capitalize on this trend was a man known for presiding over mass weddings rather than hooking fish: Reverend Sun Myung Moon, founder of the controversial Unification Church. In 1978, Moon opened a tuna business in Gloucester, Massachusetts, transforming the coastal town into a major *toro* supplier. Another business founded by Moon, True World Foods of Chicago, would go on to become America's dominant sushi supplier; odds are your last piece of *kanpachi* (young yellowtail) or *saba* (mackerel) passed through True World's hands.

When Japan's economy was at its frothiest, Gloucester bluefins could fetch $50 per pound at Tsukiji. But overfishing and the yen's tumble have ended those halcyon days, as Issenberg discovered on his gloomy visit to New England: "Where fishermen once might have wanted to know whether anyone had a fish that broke $20 per pound in Tokyo, now they just wanted to know whether anything had been caught at all."

Australian aquaculturists have gladly filled the void. In one of *The Sushi Economy*'s best chapters, Issenberg heads to Port Lincoln, home to Australia's so-called tuna barons, who raise the prized fish in pens. Keeping the world awash in sushi has made the barons exorbitantly wealthy: I don't think I'll ever have another piece of *toro* without thinking of Sam Sarin, a baron who styled his garish estate after Southfork Ranch, home to the Ewing clan on the 1980s soap opera *Dallas*. The Port Lincoln tunas aren't considered of especially high quality (Issenberg compares them to New Balance sneakers), but that doesn't bother many buyers nowadays—the end consumers who pay $5.99 for six-piece supermarket sushi trays aren't going to complain. Besides, a good proportion of that ranched tuna ends up in such novelties as spicy tuna rolls, an American creation which uses mayonnaise and hot sauce to mask the taste of subpar fish.

Issenberg is clearly a lifelong sushi connoisseur, so there's a hint of sadness to his descriptions of the cuisine's vulgarization—the takeout chains where pieces are "either punched out and assembled by automated machines known as 'sushi robots' or by minimally trained human beings"; the Los Angeles restaurant where the chefs double as tap dancers. And he notes that the venerable Nobu Matsuhisa, whose eponymous New York City restaurant popularized nouveau sushi among the glitterati, has become more corporate mascot than authentic chef: "These days, Matsuhisa seems to pick up a knife only for photo shoots." Nobu branches, meanwhile, now operate in Dallas, Las Vegas, and the Bahamas; in the last of these locations, every single piece of fish must be shipped in from Miami, since there is no local seafood market.

But Issenberg never wallows in foodie nostalgia. Instead, he celebrates sushi's emergence as a case of globalization at its best, with consumers and producers working in relative harmony despite rarely encountering one another face-to-face. At its best, *The Sushi Economy* reads like the giddiest, geekiest Food Network special ever made, a paean to man's endless innovation in the name of gluttony. It's certainly tough not to enjoy a book that includes a step-by-step guide to winning Port Lincoln's annual tuna-tossing competition ("Stand with your back to the intended destination and spin two rotations counterclockwise …").

There are moments, however, when Issenberg's infatuation with microscopic detail can grate rather than entertain. A chapter on the education of a Texan sushi chef, for example, bogs down in a list of his restaurant's expenditures, broken down to the dollar. And Issenberg's description of the Tsukiji market moves at a snail's pace, as he fixates on the compound's geometric layout: "There are eight streets," he writes, "ordered concentrically, which are intersected by seven avenues, evenly spaced radii …"

Thankfully, *The Sushi Economy* never entirely loses sight of its larger themes. Issenberg views sushi's spread as confirmation that "a virtuous global commerce and food culture can exist"—in other words, that people can enjoy their *toro* without screwing over another community some several thousand miles away. He naturally credits this to the free market and technological progress, but also to genuine human decency. Since fishing is such an uncertain business, many of the deals that keep the sushi trade afloat depend on trust, often between two parties who don't share the same continent, let alone the same language. Yet the system works, Issenberg contends, because all societies share the inborn knack for commerce—not to mention the flexibility necessary to adapt foreign cuisine for local palates.

These big-picture lessons about globalization may not be particularly revelatory, but they're well illustrated by Issenberg's admirably exhaustive reporting. Judging by the book's acknowledgments, he spent time in at least sixteen cities, ranging from Shanghai to Barcelona to Chascomus, Argentina. My only quibble with Issenberg's itinerary is that he never spent time in—or, at least, he failed to set a scene in—one of the countless mini-mall sushi bars that now thrive in Landlocked America, where *toro* was eschewed as effete just a generation ago. (The Texas restaurant doesn't really count, as it's located in affluent, bohemian Austin.) But perhaps this is understandable: if I were in charge of organizing a sushi reporting trip, I'd much rather dine at the Tsukiji market in Tokyo than at Sushi Factory in Omaha.

Brendan I. Koerner (www.youthrobber.com) is a contributing editor at *Wired* and a columnist for the *New York Times*. His first book, about a 1940s murder case, will be published by the Penguin Press next spring.

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